

A Black Appalachian's reflection on the memorial to West Virginia miners

By Bill Turner

William H. Turner, the National Endowment for the Humanities Chair in Appalachian Studies at Berea College in Kentucky, represented Gov. Steve Beshear at the memorial service.

Thanks, West Virginia. Your ceremony of homage to the 29 coal miners killed in an explosion was not only powerful, it reminded me of what America was, is, and can be. President Obama, the eulogist, put our shared ideas and aims best when he said, "We are all family. We are Americans. We have to look out for one another."

To me, black, born and raised in a Southern Baptist coal-mining family in Harlan County, Kentucky, those words from our president will forever resonate with the impact of President Kennedy's famous line almost 50 years ago, "Ich bin ein Berliner" (I am a Berliner). Although Mr. Obama did not go so far as to say, "We are all Appalachian coal miners," he did say, to resounding applause, "Our task is to save lives from being lost in another such tragedy. To do what must be done, individually and collectively, to assure safe conditions underground. To treat our miners the way they treat each other - like family. The backdrop to that sentiment hung over the ceremony like the fog on the nearby mountains: how much more are we willing to pay a month on our light bill to make sure coal mining is safe?"

When Mr. Obama said, as Martin Luther King did, that all our destinies are inextricably intertwined, a young white man - in a baseball cap - bolted from his seat next to my wife and shouted, "West Virginia loves you, Obama!" Before we could recoil from our astonishment at this man's approval of our president - the race-baited 2008 election campaign in West Virginia still in memory - we found ourselves sobbing with him and others as a child among the grief-stricken families screeched "Daddy! Daddy!" while the president called out, in slow cadence, the name of each fallen miner. Thank you, West Virginia!

Vice President Biden talked of the stories he had heard from his Pennsylvania coal-mining grandfather and of his shared grief with the families of the fallen, reminding them of when his wife and daughter were killed in a car wreck. There is nothing partisan about unspeakable pain and suffering and hope and healing. Thank you, Mr. Vice President.

There were lots of ladies with pompadour hair styles and men and boys in baseball caps and lots of bare feet in flip flops. The many casually dressed people - one a black man in designer camouflage - were not the least bit tacky nor tasteless, or disrespectful to the deceased or the president. The ambience "filled up my senses, like a night in the forest." President Obama reminded the throng to depend on each other, calling forth the refrain of the old standard, Lean on Me, by hometown favorite son Bill Withers. Thank you, everyday people!

In the most dominant words spoken during the nearly three-hour solemn yet upbeat ceremony, West Virginia State Police Chaplain Rev. James Mitchell - who had the onerous burden of being with the families continuously after the April 5th disaster, having participated in 26 of the 29 funerals - quoted, in his meditation, from the famous sermon, "That's My King," by Rev. S. M. Lockridge, an African-American preacher.

His brawny voice trembled and vacillated throughout, but his words, like those of almost every other speaker, beamed, like a shaft of light in a coal mine, directly onto the power and presence of God in the lives of these working-class Appalachian families: "He supplies strength for the weak; He discharges debtors; He delivers captives; He defends the feeble; He blesses the young; He serves the unfortunate; and He beautifies the meek. . . . I wonder if you know Him? Death couldn't handle Him, and the grave couldn't hold Him. Yea! That's my King, that's my King."

President Obama spent the morning before the service talking and praying with evangelist Rev. Billy Graham. That experience may have keyed up the well-expressed eulogy he gave to the fallen miners and comforted their grief-stricken families, all sitting in front of a starkly beautiful tombstone-like object made up of 29 coal miners' work helmets, tiny lights ablaze.

During the postlude and processional – following finely appropriate words and songs from 20 different speakers and choirs – the gathered throng thumped along as the all-black Martin Luther King Jr. Male Chorus led the singing of “This Little Light of Mine.” Hope and Healing, the program theme, was much more than the designation on the program, which was festooned on richly textured paper depicting a miner's work gloves and hat. Thank you, choir!

Never had I heard the words brotherhood, Christian, courage, devoted, family, friend, strength, fun-loving, hard-working, neighborly, patriot, and selfless spoken in so many ways. Psalm 121 (“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help”) took on a whole new meaning.

When one of the speakers referred to a coal mine as “the very heart of darkness,” I rethought my reading of Joseph Conrad's book with a similar title. I was reminded of the time 50 years ago when our family waited on the word about my father, a coal miner, who was trapped for hours, severely injured. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” also made me appreciate anew where Dad went to work to support our big family each day for nearly a half century. The occasion re-ignited my memory of Matewan, W.Va., where he entered the mines, a 15 year-old boy, in 1932.

I was so happy to see the significant number of black participants on the program and in the audience, reflecting how they, not too long ago, filled many of the now-forgotten hollows in places like Keystone, Welch, and Gary, in West Virginia; and in Harlan, Hazard, and Lynch and Benham, in Eastern Kentucky. Thanks, miners who looked like my Dad, often ignored or rendered invisible.

I clutched my copy of *Uneven Ground*, a new, penetrating, and thought-provoking book on Central Appalachia. Its' review of the traditions, the dispossession, and the plans for development in Appalachia found expression in the moment. Thanks, Professor Ron Eller, Beckley native.

What a fellowship, what a divine joy, to be in the company of fine people saying words about setting right the lives of coal mining families and singing songs of praise and possibility. Thanks, West Virginia. Thanks, Mr. President! The way you memorialized these miners took us all to that same mountaintop Martin Luther King looked over back in 1968, when he saw the Promise Land!

Thank you, Lord God!